

Law stunts wineries' market growth

Politicians push to nix restriction

BY DON GLYNN

Glynnnd@gnnewspaper.com

While local tourist industry leaders look to the new Niagara Wine Trail as an ambitious effort to boost the local economy, winery operators hope that a current government restriction on their business will soon be eliminated.

Under what they perceive as an archaic law, the wineries say they cannot establish new markets via direct shipment to out-of-state customers wanting to buy their products.

The law has its roots from the Prohibition era, when the federal government cracked down on the illegal sale of liquor and beer.

The present-day wine grower's concern was mentioned more than once this week when state Agriculture Commissioner Nathan L. Rudgers visited Niagara

Falls to mark the opening of a Farmers Market adjacent to the Niagara Gorge Discovery Center in the nation's oldest state park.

Starting this weekend, the market featuring choice wines and home-grown products from county farms will be open six consecutive Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

"It's an ideal chance for farmers to make a direct connection with consumers and promote local agriculture in their communities," Rudgers said.

Rep. Louise M. Slaughter, D-Fairport, whose 28th District seat includes the Niagara area, noted the new Falls market would afford visitors a unique opportunity to "smell, taste, savor and buy" the best agricultural products this region offers.

"I regret that I can't say the same for the wines we produce here, but we're working on that," Slaughter said. "New York state will still not allow shipments out of state because of those old laws."



L. Slaughter
Congresswoman

The congresswoman is confident the legislation will be revised, a change that could generate millions of dollars in revenue for the local vineyards, she added.

Speaking at a press briefing, Slaughter noted the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear the case, possibly in its fall session.

Assemblywoman Francine DelMonte, D-Niagara Falls, who has supported the wine trail development since the day she took office three years ago, has pledged to push for the state Legislature to end the competitive disadvantage now confronting the area wine producers.

In his 2004-05 executive budget, Gov. George Pataki addressed that concern too. He contends that his proposal will enable wineries in this state to better compete with those in such states as California and Washington.

As part of that proposal, the out-of-state wineries that want to ship to customers in New York State will be required to pay an annual license fee, pay excise sales tax and be limited in the number of cases they can ship directly every month to individuals over the age

of 21. Last year, New York wineries were host to more than three million visitors in the state's four main wine producing regions: the Finger Lakes, Long Island, the Hudson Valley and Lake Erie.

Winery owners from Cambria and Gasport to Lockport and Appleton — between the Niagara Escarpment and Lake Ontario — are counting the days when their six operations will draw countless visitors. The Marjim Manor on East Lake Road, Cambria, is celebrating its grand opening this weekend. The winery will operate from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Saturday and from noon to 6 p.m. on Sundays.

Those same wineries will be testing the waters this fall with a shuttle service from downtown Niagara Falls to six sites on the wine trail.

Michael J. VonHeckler, president of the Niagara Wine Trail, is convinced the wineries will play an important role in area tourism.

Contact Don Glynn at
(716) 282-2311, Ext. 2246.